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LAMB AND THE PERIODICAL ESSAY

BY HARRY T. BAKER

WRITING to Crabb Robinson in January of 1827, Lamb said: "Poor Norris has been lying dying for now almost a week. . . . In him I have a loss the world cannot make up. He was my friend and my father's friend all the life I can remember. I seem to have made foolish friendships ever since. Those are friendships which outlive a second generation. Old as I am waxing [Lamb was then fifty-two], in his eyes I was still the child he first knew me. To the last he called me Charley. I have none to call me Charley now." Randal Norris was one of the "Old Benchers of the Inner Temple"; and in that richly reminiscent and poetic essay he, with his compeers, made up to "Charley" Lamb a kind of mythology, enshrouded in a "preternatural mist". "In those days," says Elia, "I saw Gods, as 'old men covered with a mantle', walking upon the earth."

It is in such letters that we see the real Lamb—not the casual jester and punster, not even the seventeenth century stylist, choicest pupil of Sir Thomas Browne, but the Lamb with a genius for friendship, with a soul at once tender and virile, the Lamb whose Wednesday evenings were famous and who, to quote his own phrase, was "never C. L., but always C. L. & Co." He sometimes humorously offered to sell a consignment of friends cheap; but he really could not have spared any of them. He bore their infirmities, pierced unfailingly into their better selves, and grappled them to his soul with hoops of steel. It is as a friend that his readers know him; and one risks little in an assertion that he is the best loved author in English literature.

We do not rank Lamb; we cherish him. For he was in touch with the innermost realities of life. He hated formalities and stiff conventions. Surnames were to him a superfluity; Christians, he said, should call each other by Christian names. Like Dr. Johnson, he loved good talk; and of one of his friends, John

Fenwick, editor of *The Albion*, he confided, "He was great at the midnight hour." Many, beyond question, were the evenings when, in a Falstaffian paradise, he and his intimates heard the chimes at midnight; and occasionally, perhaps, they were a little the worse for gin and water or other intoxicants—but not much the worse, for Mary was always present to lend decorum. Hazlitt has portrayed, with even more than his usual felicity, one of those Wednesday evenings, in his essay, *Persons One Would Wish To Have Seen*. To miss this is to cut a huge cantle out of the sum total of enjoyment. His jests, says Hazlitt, "scald like tears." It is a notable tribute, by a man who was himself a master of phrase; and it illuminates the problem of Elia's charm better than any other brief comment. Lamb was an incorrigible jester, but he never replies to us with a fool-born jest. Even in his most casual jokes there is usually a wise touch of philosophy, and almost always a memorable phrase.

If it is in his letters that we see Lamb most clearly,—and this is probably the case,—we find in them ample refutation of his overemphasized "gentleness" of nature. Wordsworth, it is true, in a poem written after the death of his friend, called him "the frolic and the gentle"; but Lamb had long before protested vigorously to Coleridge against being gentled. "For God's sake," he wrote, "don't make me ridiculous any more by terming me gentle-hearted in print. . . . Blot out 'gentle-hearted', and substitute 'drunken dog, ragged head, seld-shaven, odd-eyed, stuttering', or any other epithet which truly and properly belongs to the gentleman in question." This in 1800, when Lamb was but twenty-five. There was nothing effeminate about such a man. That perfect essay, *Dream Children*, reveals not a single false note of sentiment; and one of the most robust of modern writers, Kipling, had it in the back of his mind when he in turn glorified the love of children in his masterpiece, *They*, a tale of ghostly radiance which raises the short story to a higher power.

But this is to stray a bit from Lamb the letter-writer. One can best appreciate his genius in this field by comparing Stevenson's epistles. The latter are uncommonly good, but seldom or never as good as his essays and stories. One does not feel of Lamb, on the contrary, that he deliberately saved his best things for pub-

lication. It is true, however, that when he was writing the Elia essays the effect upon the volume of his correspondence was striking. His letters from 1820 to 1825 were like angels' visits, short and far between. It is in the twenty years before he turned Elia that he scattered the largess of his familiar correspondence with a prodigality like that of nature. And how completely spontaneous he was! Lamb never worried about losing his dignity; *otium cum indignitate*, he said, was good enough for him. The remark is characteristic. And it was some of this *otium* that he lavished on his letters before he actually turned author at forty-five, after many abortive experiments and a few modest successes. His humor in his correspondence is essentially the same as in those famous Elia essays.

If Lamb had written nothing but his letters, he would still have been entitled to the admiration and the love of future generations. And it was long before he did write anything else which instantly commanded public attention. The jokes which he contributed to *The Morning Post* in 1802 and 1803 at sixpence each were often labored and seldom worthy of him; it was galley toil for such a spirit as Lamb. His verses were few, though, as *The Old Familiar Faces* attests, far from negligible. As a critic he led, in company with Hazlitt, the romantic revival. His comments and selections, in his *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets About the Time of Shakespeare*, were the work of an eager and delicately gifted pioneer. They opened long forgotten fields to the public of 1808. During the previous year, moreover, he and Mary had published the admirable *Tales from Shakespeare*. And for ten years before that he had been struggling with manuscript of various sorts: a novelette, *Rosamund Gray*; a poetical drama, *John Woodvil*, which contains one excellent forest scene; an essay, *The Londoner*, in *The Morning Post*, first of a series never carried out; and an inglorious farce, *Mr. H.*, the suspense in which turned out to be the suppression of the plebeian name of Hogsflesh—an anticlimax properly disapproved by the audience. "Damn 'em, how they hissed!" said Lamb. "It was not a hiss, neither, but a sort of a frantic yell, like a congregation of mad geese, with roaring sometimes like bears, mows and mops like apes, sometimes snakes, that hissed me into madness." The madness ended, how-

ever, in the sane reflection that he was not a dramatist; and thereafter he devoted himself to the rambling and intimate personal essay, a form in which he was admirably fitted to succeed.

The credit for discovering Lamb's possibilities as a magazine contributor belongs in part to his good friend Leigh Hunt, but in much greater part to the brilliant and ill-fated John Scott, who died as the result of a duel in 1821, only a year after he had assumed his duties as editor of *The London Magazine*. It was Hunt who induced Lamb to contribute to his short-lived quarterly, *The Reflector*, during 1810 and 1811, a mirthful paper on *Inconveniences Resulting from Being Hanged*, the famous critical paper on Shakespeare's tragedies, and a first draft, later revised and reprinted in *The London Magazine*, of *A Bachelor's Complaint of the Behavior of Married People*. In 1814 Scott printed in *The Champion*, which he edited for a short time, Lamb's article, *The Melancholy of Tailors*, an excellent preliminary study for the Elia papers. On the whole, it was probably fortunate that none of these early magazines and newspapers afforded Lamb an opportunity to become a regular contributor; for even in 1814 his genius as essayist had not thoroughly ripened. It was perhaps at the most fortunate moment, in his forty-fifth year, that Scott reëngaged him for *The London Magazine*, to which he contributed during the next five years about fifty papers of permanent literary value over the now immortal signature of "Elia".

It is unfortunate that we have no record of Lamb's relations with John Scott; they must have exchanged at least a few letters during the Elia period, but none has survived. Lamb's only reference is in a letter of 1825, to Bernard Barton: "Why did poor Scott die? There was comfort in writing with such associates as were his little band of Scribblers, some gone away, some affronted away, and I am left as the solitary widow looking for water-cresses." In a postscript he adds, "I am fifty years old this day." Even such a brief and casual tribute shows the cordial and helpful relation between editor and contributor. Moreover, any man who could keep Hazlitt as a "regular" for a year, as Scott did, was a marvel of tact and friendliness.

It is particularly worthy of note that Scott did not always place Lamb's essay before Hazlitt's in the various issues of *The London*

Magazine from August, 1820, to February, 1821, when he died. He played no favorites, but "featured" whatever was most worthy of the front page. In January, 1821, Hazlitt's *The Look of a Gentleman* takes second place to Elia's *New Year's Eve*; but in February *On Reading Old Books* has the superior place and *Mrs. Battle's Opinions on Whist* retires "to a prepared position". Hazlitt had also scored over his old friend in the December issue, when *The Pleasure of Painting* took precedence over *The Two Races of Men*, in spite of the fact that the latter is easily the more popular, in the ordinary sense, and would probably have been put on the first page by most present-day editors. *The London Magazine*, which perished in 1829, was never addressed to the multitude. It assumed in its readers a background of culture and a love of style. If John Scott had survived, it is quite possible that his magazine would have survived with him for many years. Lovers of Elia will not soon forget Scott's brief association with his most distinguished contributor. How much he stimulated and developed Lamb's genius we shall never know; but he was the man who brought and maintained the hitherto comparatively obscure essayist before his appreciative public.

Even to-day, however, Elia does not command so large an audience as, say, Mark Twain—a humorist and philosopher of quite a different complexion. Lamb does not address himself so directly to what Whitman called "powerful, uneducated people". Those who love his essays love them intensely; but there are many who do not love them at all. It is on the whole much easier to tell why Elia is disliked than why he is liked. He compliments his reader too much. He is full of recondite allusions, scraps of Shakespeare, shadows of Sir Thomas Browne, Fuller, Burton, and the Bible. He is continually using Scriptural forms for humorous purposes. He employs curious Latin derivatives such as "sciential apples" of Eden, "relucts" at destiny, "arride and solace me." He is subtly whimsical both in thought and expression; to use his own term, he is guilty of a thousand "whim-whams". He is probably the most obscure of English humorists; yet his obscurities are always worth exploring. He has the imagination, and often the phrase, of a poet. Whole essays are sometimes poetic. It is difficult to decide when he is serious

and when humorous. Carlyle utterly misjudged him; Wordsworth, being destitute of a sense of humor, probably did not more than half understand him. The famous comptroller of stamps whose phrenological development he wished to examine—after the worthy citizen had asked some exceedingly foolish questions—must have thought him a madman. One can still hear the blessed laughter of the gods, including Lamb himself, which followed that immortal incident at Haydon's dinner. No, Elia was not always intelligible; and never to stupid people. As he said himself, in the preface to the *Last Essays*, "He observed neither time nor place, and would e'en out with what came uppermost. . . . Few understood him; and I am not quite certain that at all times he quite understood himself. He too much affected that dangerous figure—irony. He sowed doubtful speeches, and reaped plain, unequivocal hatred." And again: "He had a general aversion from being treated like a grave or respectable character, and kept a wary eye upon the advances of age that should so entitle him. He herded always, while it was possible, with people younger than himself. . . . He was too much of the boy-man."

It is indeed his possession of the unquenchable spirits of youth which explains many of his traits and whims of style. These he shares with most genuine humorists. It is probably a trait of all genius never to surrender ignominiously to old age. Did not even Wordsworth, grave and reverend person, praise the youth as nearest to the divine? Did not Hazlitt write a remarkable paper on *The Feeling of Immortality in Youth*? Authors whom the gods love never grow old; and many of them never reach old age even in actual years. Lamb himself died at fifty-nine; Shakespeare, Thackeray, and Hazlitt at fifty-two; Stevenson at forty-four; Burns at thirty-seven; Keats, one of the most gifted of all, at twenty-six. Lamb was already nigh unto fifty when he wrote *Poor Relations*, but it is full of purely boyish quips and, to poor Crabb Robinson, boyish cruelties. Yet it is full, also, of learning and wisdom; for Lamb was essentially a wise man with a remarkable sense of humor and of humorous phrase. He has left behind him, in his works, the high spirits of youth joined to the wisdom of age. He has fulfilled the French proverb, *Si jeunesse savait!*

Such a man can never be in the crude sense a popular writer. He does not condescend to his reader; he requires sympathetic discernment. He rides the good horse Imagination at a break-neck pace, expecting us to follow. The archaisms of his diction are not in the vocabulary of the mob. They are a perverse and stiff-necked generation that know not Sir Thomas and the *Urn Burial*. The stately rhythms of the King James Version are lost on them. Descriptions of sun-dials put them out; they are for the ponderous embowelments of clocks. Lamb is not for such readers. They may enjoy his most intensely personal essays, full of alluring autobiography and innocent of vanity; but they will never climb his heights and look into his promised land. It is only the true disciple who really enjoys Lamb's best papers and passages. If I were to choose any one as a test, it should be *A Quaker's Meeting*. It is not fairly representative of his humor, for it contains very little; but that little has all of his finest subtlety—such phrases, for example, as the description of the uniformity of the Quakers, from their garb and stillness conjoined, a uniformity “tranquil and herd-like—as in the pasture—‘forty feeding like one.’” The essay has a peacefulness of atmosphere that falls like dew on the troubled spirit. It is that perfect art which conceals itself. Where, outside of the King James Version, or of Sir Thomas Browne, can we find such rhythm, such gentle sliding of sounds like waters pouring from a hillside spring?

No one can doubt, after reading such an essay, that it is great literature. Yet the editors of a recent volume of literary selections for the use of college students calmly omit Lamb and Hazlitt and proceed to justify the omission by the remarkable assertion that to encourage a pupil “in pleasant rambles with Elia or Hazlitt through the by-ways of literature is to put a weapon into the hands of those critics who condemn the English teacher as a pedant or a dilettant and to hasten the exodus of college men from the Liberal Arts course.” The thing to do, say these exponents of liberal culture, is to study authors who present “a logically connected programme of ideas”! Study Huxley, study Mill, study Godwin, study Paine—all of whom are represented in this volume—but don't study Lamb! In other words, don't study literature.

Unlike Hazlitt, who proclaimed himself a good hater, Lamb was not a lover of recrimination or even of legitimate criticism. His critical papers, though often admirable, are few. He did not enjoy pointing out men's defects; and a literary judge cannot avoid this. Arnold did not try to avoid it; he reminded us that excellence is not, as the lady from Ohio thought, common and abundant, and that to maintain severe standards is one of the critic's first duties. Lamb's critical essays, it will be observed, are chiefly appreciations. And everybody recollects his remark that he couldn't hate anyone whom he knew. He had that sweetness of nature which contemporary writers attributed to Shakespeare and which makes us curious to know more about Shakespeare's life and character. Fortunately we do know Lamb's, and to know it is a possession forever.

The contributions of Elia and Hazlitt to *The London Magazine* begin a new era in periodical literature. Not only were their papers much longer than those of *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, but they were essentially different in kind. They were much more warm and intimate, more personal and colorful, richer in imagination and emotion—in a word, more romantic. The carefully restrained and slightly tepid lucubrations of Addison show the caution and the distrust of "enthusiasm" which mark the characteristic works of the first half of the eighteenth century. Addison almost never takes us into his confidence. And even warm-hearted Steele does not reveal anything like the whole of his personality in his magazine papers. There is that indispensable quality, variety; but there is a certain thinness. In both Lamb and Hazlitt, and again in Thackeray and Stevenson, there is depth—often a depth that suggests the "sunken wrack and sumless treasuries" in the bed of old ocean. There is intensity of emotion, too, as in Hazlitt's *My First Acquaintance With Poets* and Elia's *Dream Children*. There is indubitable originality, as in Lamb's suggestion of a grace before Shakespeare and a devotional form for a moonlight ramble. And there is a new kind of satire, neither Swiftian nor Addisonian, in *Imperfect Sympathies*, which without bitterness subtly and almost mercilessly impales those Scotch editors, particularly the editors of *Blackwood's*, who had included Lamb in the Cockney School of English writers and

who had hounded poor John Scott to his death. I suspect that Elia was quietly avenging Scott, for the essay was published in August of 1821, only a few months after the fatal duel, and its title in *The London Magazine* was *Jews, Quakers, Scotchmen, and Other Imperfect Sympathies*. "I have been trying all my life to like Scotchmen," says Lamb, "and am obliged to desist from the experiment in despair." Men like himself, he adds modestly, have minds "suggestive rather than comprehensive":

The brain of a true Caledonian (if I am not mistaken) is constituted upon quite a different plan. His Minerva is born in panoply. You are never admitted to see his ideas in their growth—if, indeed, they do grow, and are not rather put together upon principles of clockwork. You never catch his mind in an undress. He never hints or suggests anything, but unlades his stock of ideas in perfect order and completeness. He brings his total wealth into company, and gravely unpacks it. . . . He has no falterings of self-suspicion. Surmises, guesses, misgivings, half intuitions, semi-consciousnesses, partial illuminations, dim instincts, embryo conceptions, have no place in his brain, or vocabulary.

Even when he is treating a thoroughly popular subject, such as *A Chapter on Ears*, Lamb is not broadly popular in workmanship. He begins with the brisk journalistic sentence, "I have no ear," but he soon wanders off into imaginative metaphors such as "volutes to the human capital" and "indispensable side-intelligencers", and ends with a whimsical description of "that inexhausted German ocean, above which, in triumphant progress, dolphin-seated, ride those Arions *Haydn* and *Mozart*, with their attendant Tritons, *Bach*, *Beethoven*, and a countless tribe". This classical allusion is hardly adapted to the education of such readers, now a host, as are innocent of Greek and Latin mythology. In *The Two Races of Men*, with its ludicrous analysis of borrowers and lenders, he is nearer to the average of humanity; but here also he indulges in subtleties of phraseology. One of his choicest jests, however, is not caviare to the multitude: that on his old friend, Ralph Bigod, Esq., "who departed this life on Wednesday evening; dying, as he had lived, without much trouble." This has all the simplicity and inevitability of perfect art. So, too, has his epigram, in conversation, that we are ashamed of the resemblance of monkeys to ourselves "on the same principle that we avoid poor relations".

In his volume of miscellaneous prose there are about half a dozen papers which had appeared in *The London Magazine* over the signature "Elia" but had not been reprinted in the two volumes of Elia essays: a *Letter to an Old Gentleman Whose Education Has Been Neglected*, *A Vision of Horns*, *Unitarian Protests*, *The Gentle Giantess*, and others. These may be called the Elia Apocrypha; and they cannot safely be overlooked, for in most cases the reason for exclusion was not lack of merit. *The Gentle Giantess* celebrated a living subject, a Mrs. Smith, of Cambridge, whom Lamb delicately transferred to Oxford, changing her name but not concealing her vast bulk. The description, in Biblical English chiefly, of her sufferings in hot weather, and of her ingeniously contrived ice-cellar, which gives her leaner friends face-aches, is near the top of Elia's fun-making. It is truly literary farce, almost as full of cunningly wrought phrase as the *Quaker's Meeting* or *Oxford in the Vacation*. The *Essays of Elia* are incomplete without this bulky addition. One wickedly thinks how easily this heroine would have broken a bench at the Quaker meeting or gloriously participated in the banquet of roast pig. Her back may be "broad enough to bear the blame of all the peccadillos that have been committed since Adam", but it is not an apocryphal back. It is as genuine as gospel. This gentle burthen should be plucked out from the imperfect sympathies of its miscellany of comrades and set in the canon. It is full of Lamb's kindness, as well as his genius. Even in its perception of the oddest incongruities it is never malicious. Like all of its author's essays, it reveals his amused tolerance of this earthly scene, his philosophic pregnancy of phrase, his unpredictable attitude to revered conventions, and above all his undefeated youthfulness and charm of spirit. "A spirit communicated is a perpetual possession." It is this that we possess as we close the *Last Essays*, remembering that Elia was the brave and quiet optimist who for nearly forty years in the wilderness had tenderly ministered to the mind diseased of his sister Mary, living with her, to use his own quaint phrase, "in a kind of double singleness" until death drew him away. Such a rare spirit is above ordinary criticism.

HARRY T. BAKER.